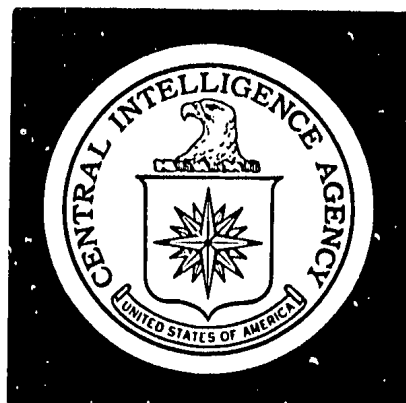


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DIRECTORATE OF  
INTELLIGENCE

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# Intelligence Memorandum

*Chinese Road Construction In Northern Laos.*

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ER IM 70-4  
January 1970

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Directorate of Intelligence  
January 1970

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Chinese Road Construction  
In Northern Laos

Introduction

With the beginning of the dry season in September 1969, the Chinese renewed their road construction activities in northern Laos. Branch roads currently are being extended off an all-weather route completed in early 1969 between Yunnan Province and the village of Muong Sai, some 50 miles inside Laos. Government leaders in Laos and Thailand are most concerned with the branch road that is being constructed at a rapid pace in the direction of a Mekong River village less than 20 miles from the Thai border. This memorandum details the progress being made on this road and on other road construction in northern Laos.

The Ban Batene - Muong Sai Road

1. In early 1968, the Chinese made preparations for road construction in northern Laos by improving roads running to the border and by erecting large numbers of support buildings in China. They also made the major trails around Ban Batene motorable (see Figure 1). These preparations were the beginnings of a new round of Chinese roadbuilding activity in Laos since a road was constructed in 1963-64

*Note: This memorandum was produced solely by CIA. It was prepared by the Office of Economic Research and was coordinated with the Office of Current Intelligence and the Office of Strategic Research.*

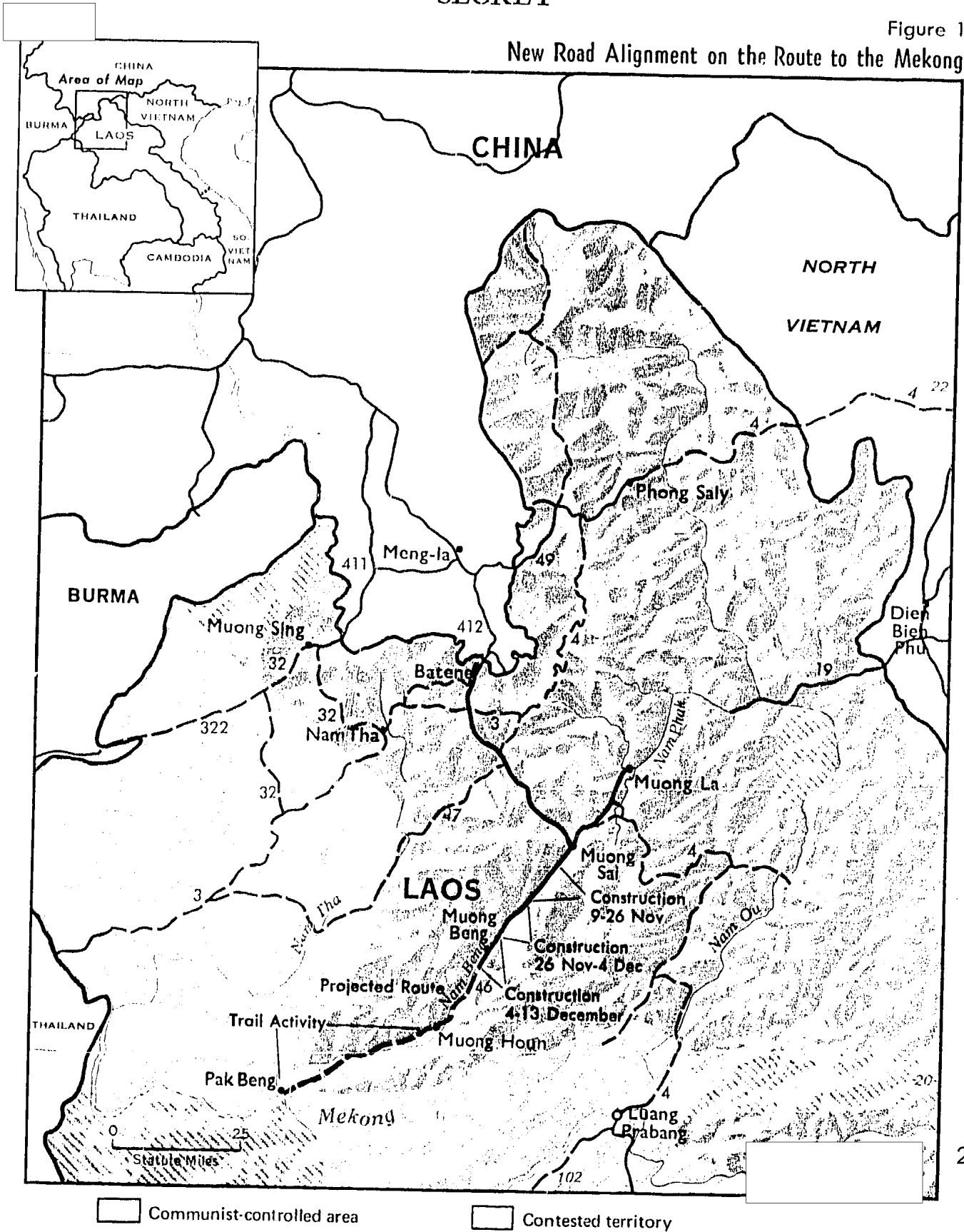
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Figure 1 25X1

New Road Alignment on the Route to the Mekong



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between Meng La, in the Yunnan salient of China, and Phong Saly, capital of Phong Saly Province.\*

2. In September 1968, the Chinese began to build the main Ban Betene - Muong Sai road. The initial construction force of 1,500 troops reportedly was aided by ten bulldozers, some 35 trucks, several rock crushers, and at least one motorized surface roller. By the end of November 1968, the Chinese had added 1,500 more laborers, armed troops, and support personnel and had completed about half of a preliminary road on the 52-mile route to Muong Sai. As a result of this rapid pace, the road was completed by the end of 1968 to within a few miles of Muong Sai (see Figure 2).

3. With the exception of a short section south of the Chinese border, the new road generally follows a heavily used trail between Ban Batene and Muong Sai. The road is of excellent construction and is laid out with good grades and few curves. Concrete culverts and short bridges are constructed at water crossings and the road is surfaced with crushed stone and gravel (see Figure 3). The village of Muong Sai was a logical choice for the first terminus for two main reasons: first, it is an important Pathet Lao headquarters and, second, it is a major junction for trails leading north toward Route 19 and on to Dien Bien Phu, and for trails leading southwest to Pak Beng on the Mekong.

#### The Road to Muong La

4. Prior to the completion of the road to Muong Sai, the Chinese in January 1969 started work on a branch road (Route 45) northeast from Muong Sai toward the village of Muong La. The road

\* *Laotian Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma has chosen to consider that the current road construction is covered under a vaguely worded communique issued in December 1962 following the visit of Deputy Premier Phoumi Nosavan to Peking. Chinese representatives in Vientiane have denied having any knowledge of current road construction in northern Laos and have not mentioned or commented on the 1962 communique.*

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Figure 2. Section of the Ban Batene-Muong Sai road about 15 miles south of the China border.

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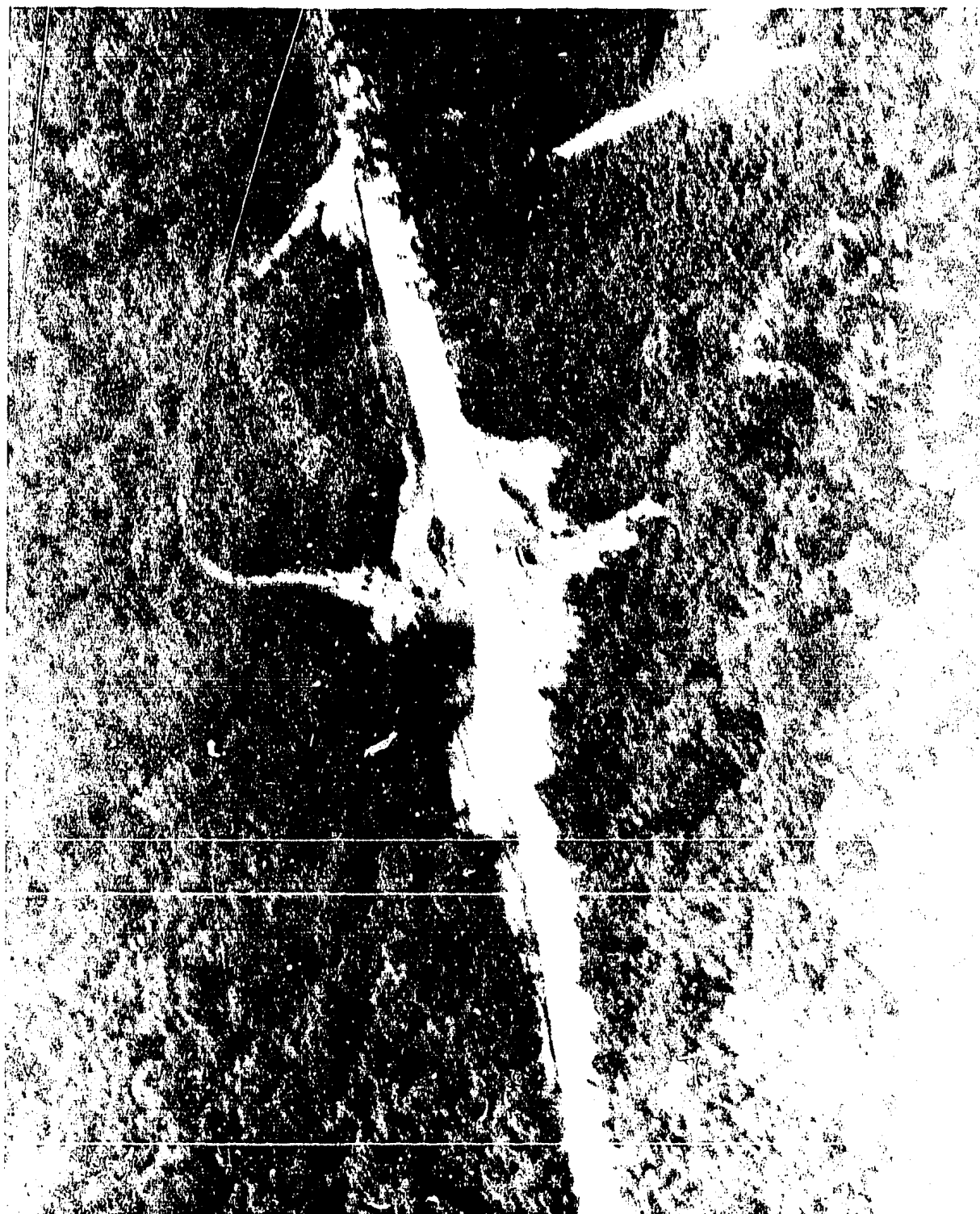


Figure 3. Concrete culvert just north of  
Muong Sai on the road to Muong La.

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apparently will connect with Route 19 which leads to Dien Bien Phu in North Vietnam. By March 1969, road construction had been completed as far as Muong La on the Nam Ma River. Work on the road was halted at that point and construction was started in April on a permanent bridge over the Nam Ma.

5. Bridge construction, which had stopped during the rainy season, was resumed at a slow pace in October 1969 and a ford was built in November near the bridge site. Work on the road, however, has been confined to improving the section between Muong Sai and Muong La by the addition of culverts and bridges and topping the earth-surface road with crushed stone. During December, approximately one mile of new road was constructed from the bridge site on the route between Muong La and the present terminus of Route 19 on the Nam Ou River (see Figure 4).

The Road to Muong Houn

6. With the return of good weather in September 1969, the Chinese started construction of a road southwest of Muong Sai toward Muong Houn. Following completion of a permanent concrete pier bridge over the Nam Ko at Muong Sai, work on the road proceeded at a rapid pace. During October, eight miles of new road was completed, and intermittent survey and preliminary road traces were cleared along the 55-mile route between Muong Sai and Muong Houn. The construction pace was accelerated in November, and by the end of the month the Chinese had extended the road an additional nine miles and cleared the road alignment for an additional 11 miles. The road was extended another 10 miles along these clearings by 4 December and preliminary traces had been prepared for an additional 10 miles (see Figure 1). By mid-December, the road was motorable for about 35 miles.

7. By 4 December, the road had crossed the high terrain dividing the watershed of the Nam Ou River system, which drains to the northeast, and tributaries of the Mekong River which drain to the southwest. Once across this divide, the road will be routed down the Beng River Valley along the general alignment of a former French logging road known as Route 46. At the present rate of

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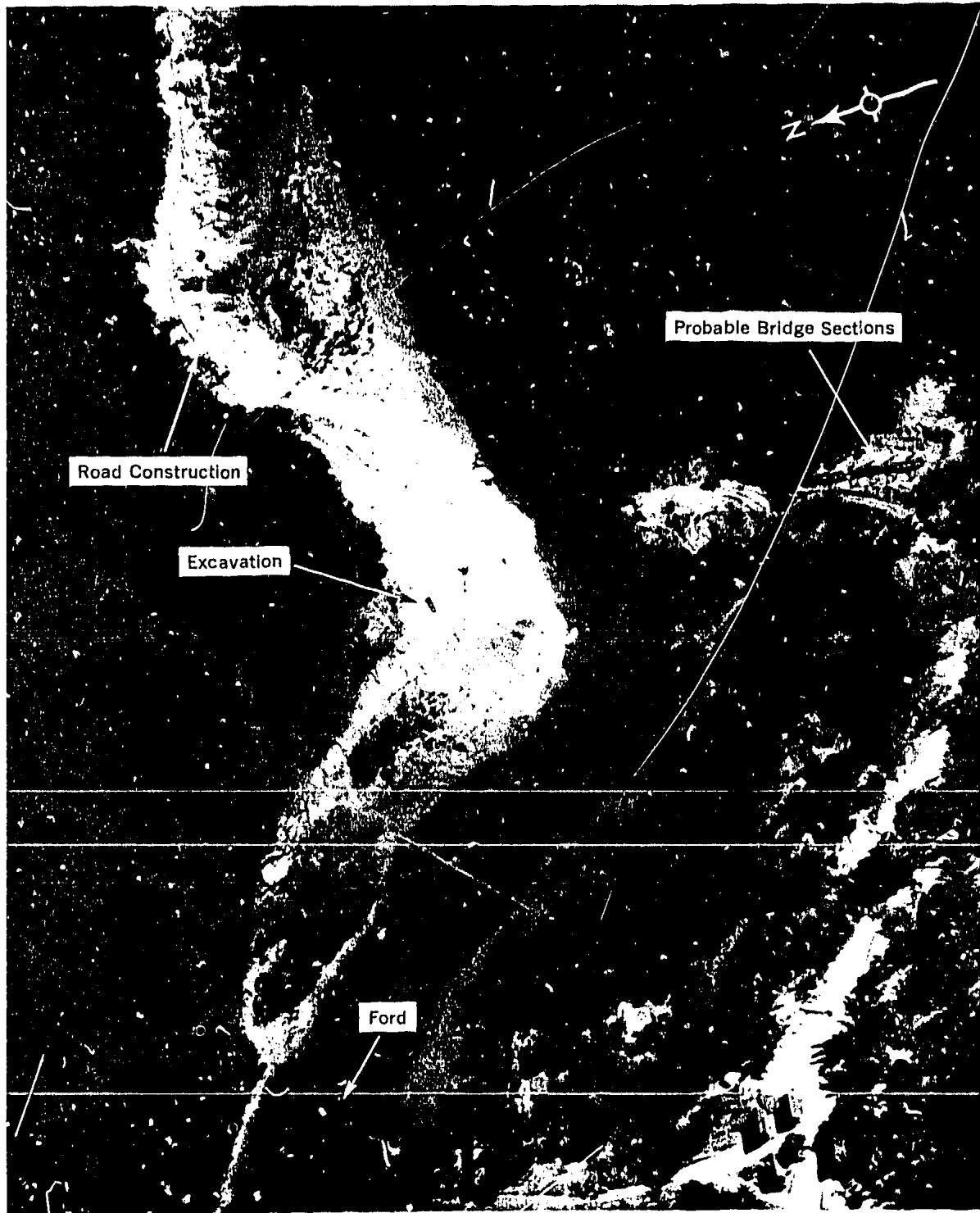


Figure 4. New bridge under construction at Muang La.

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construction (approximately one mile per day), the new road and permanent bridge and culverts could easily be completed to the Mekong by the end of the current dry season in May 1970. The 13 December terminus of the road is less than 20 miles from Muong Houn, and only 50 miles from Pahk Beng on the Mekong. There were no signs, however, that the road was being worked on beyond Muong Houn at this time.

Other Road Construction

8. The Chinese Communists recently announced to villagers in Muong Sing that they intend to build a road across northwestern Laos between Yunnan Province and Burma. The Chinese improved the border road from China to Muong Sing during early 1969, but there is no evidence that work has begun on the trails running southwest from Muong Sing. Southeast of Muong Sing, however, limited trail clearing has been observed in the area of Nam Tha, which is located midway between Ban Batene and Muong Sing. This work probably represents the start of a branch road off the Batene - Muong Sai road to Nam Tha which could be built during the next three to four months.

Construction Techniques and Equipment

9. The Chinese followed their normal, labor intensive, road construction practices in Northern Laos. In the first phase, small groups of laborers and some equipment break motorable trails, so that supplies can be provided to survey and clearing crews. The route is then cleared and widened by larger labor gangs spread out over a long distance. Only crude water crossings are prepared at this time. Other groups of workers then improve the route alignment, construct permanent bridges and culverts, and do major grading such as cutting and filling of the roadbed. In the final stage, the road is surfaced with crushed stone or gravel, and spur roads, vehicle turn-around points, and parking revetments are built. Labor gangs equipped with hand tools are stationed along the road to maintain and improve the basic roadway. This construction sequence permits the Chinese to use large numbers of laborers, and minimizes the need for mechanized equipment.

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10. By Chinese standards, however, considerable amounts of heavy construction equipment and vehicles are being used in Laos. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Photography also has revealed several rock crushers, at least two of which were co-located in a gravity-loading setup. Photographic missions during November and December 1968 revealed an average of 30 to 40 vehicles on the road between Batene and Muong Sai and roadwatch teams have reported consistent traffic volumes of 10 to 12 trucks per day since September.

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#### Permanent Facilities

11. As shown in the tabulation below, there has been a steady increase of permanent support facilities along the Batene to Muong Sai road.

| <u>Date</u>    | <u>Number of<br/>Buildings <sup>a/</sup></u> | <u>Camps/Facilities</u> |
|----------------|--|-------------------------|
| January 1969   | 140  | 37                      |
| April 1969     | 750  | 56                      |
| September 1969 | 1,100  | 57                      |

*a. Building counts have not been completed on the roads leading from Muong Sai to Muong La and Muong Houn.*

The camps are continuously being improved and have taken on a permanent appearance. The temporary bamboo sheds that were initially built to house the first work crews are being replaced with more permanent structures. Basketball courts (usually associated with Chinese, not Laotian troops) have been identified at some facilities and access roads to the camps have been improved. Antiaircraft weapon sites also have been prepared adjacent to some camps and along the roads.

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12. The capacity of the camps along the new roads in Laos exceeds the needs of the present labor force which, by October 1969, was estimated at 6,000 Chinese troops and laborers and an unknown number of indigenous villagers.

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Conclusions

13. Chinese road construction in northern Laos is proceeding at a rapid pace. As many as 6,000 Chinese troops and laborers now are involved in this program which includes the construction of a large number of permanent buildings. The Batene to Muong Sai road -- a 50-mile route which was completed between September 1968 and April 1969 -- currently is being extended southwest toward Muong Houn and the Mekong River village of Pak Beng, less than 20 miles from the Thai border. This extension was being built at a rate that averaged one mile per day during late November. If the Chinese should choose to do so, the road could be completed, with permanent water crossings, as far as the Mekong River before the start of the rainy season in May 1970.

14. The road completed in April 1969 northeast from Muong Sai to Muong La has not been extended beyond Muong La but work is nearing completion on a major bridge at its present terminus. The ultimate destination of this road probably is Route 19 which crosses into North Vietnam.

15. The roads that the Chinese have built and are building in northern Laos are two-lane, all-weather routes of excellent construction. Facilities in the camps along the road also are well constructed and are in excess of the requirements for housing work crews and equipment. These roads will give the Pathet Lao forces a stronger capability to challenge Royal Laotian troops in northwestern Laos. The high quality of the roads and the size and permanent nature of the associated facilities indicate that Chinese involvement in northern Laos is not short term.